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*Dallong*¹ - Possum Skin Rugs:

A Study of an Inter-Cultural Trade Item in Victoria
Fred Cahir

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Introduction

In June 1835 John Batman, popularly acknowledged as the founder of Melbourne, recorded one of the first times that possum skin cloaks were traded by the Aboriginal people of Victoria with the European arrivals. Before he held the formal treaty meeting with the Woiwurrung clan heads near present-day Melbourne to purchase a tract of their country, Batman had distributed gifts including blankets, beads and knives. After the meeting he wrote in his journal: 'the chiefs, to manifest their friendly feeling towards me, insisted upon my receiving from them two native cloaks and several baskets made by the women, and also some of the implements of defence'.² For the remainder of the nineteenth century these indigenous cloaks or rugs were clearly sought after by the white settlers.

*John Wesley Burt, Batman's
treaty with the aborigines at
Merri Creek, 6th June 1835,
1875, oil on canvas, painted
wood.*

*La Trobe Picture Collection,
State Library of Victoria*



The extent of inter-cultural exchange in colonial Victoria, whether between individuals or between groups, has received scant attention until now. Noted anthropologist WEH Stanner believed that systems of inter-tribal barter were widespread across Australia, while acknowledging that they had been 'inadequately studied'.³ Most of the ethnographic research on Aboriginal exchange models in northern Australia has been carried out by Stanner, Donald Thomson, and Ronald and Catherine Berndt, and focuses primarily on the trade in manufactured valuable goods in terms of inter-tribal networks.⁴ Further research on pre-colonisation and nineteenth-century Aboriginal economic organisation in Victoria has been carried out largely by Isabel McBryde, whose aims were to establish what was traded, and its context and its significance within Aboriginal communities in the south-east. McBryde has clearly demonstrated that 'Diversity and pervasiveness characterise exchange in the life of the Aboriginal societies of south-eastern Australia as revealed in the historical records of contact'.⁵ But what do we know about trade between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this period?

Discussions about the continuation of 'payment in kind' in colonial Victoria in this context are too often limited to the occasional use of Aboriginal labour and sexual services.⁶ At the same time, considerations of the inter-cultural exchange of goods are usually constrained by defining exchange solely in terms of consumable material items. Moreover, historians have generally overlooked the existing historical record of widespread and significant inter-cultural trade and applied a nineteenth-century filter when discussing 'economic activity' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.⁷ That is to say, the vocabulary used by historians to describe the role of Aboriginal people in the economic life of colonial Victoria tends to perpetuate the distortions of nineteenth-century chroniclers, who merely contrasted 'transactions appropriate to the savage with those of civilised society'.⁸ Some historians have assumed, incorrectly in my view, that Western-style economic transactions were a bewildering phenomenon for the Aboriginal people, or that the white colonists

were not interested in the material culture offered by Indigenous people.⁹ Others infer this by their failure to deal with it.

This paper focuses on the ethno-historical evidence for inter-cultural exchange, specifically in possum skins, that existed between certain Indigenous peoples and the white colonists of Victoria between 1835 and 1900. It has two main aims:

1. To survey the processes and contexts involved in the exchange of possum skins, and to demonstrate the degree to which Indigenous 'natural economies' articulated with capitalist economies in nineteenth-century Victoria.
2. To confirm manufactured products derived from possum skin as the pre-eminent inter-cultural trade item in Victoria in the nineteenth century.

In terms of the reconstruction of Aboriginal people's place, role and contribution within labour and economic sectoral histories in Victoria, the practice of historians has perhaps been naïve, and their discourse has gone largely unexamined. An empiricist methodology has been adopted in this paper and consequently a close examination of a large number of oral, visual and tactile sources has been undertaken in order to study the dynamics of inter-cultural trade and the extent to which it occurred. I also hope to provide a micro-revisionist narrative which evokes multiple voices, different angles of vision and diverse disciplinary frameworks.

Thousands of Skins for Sale


Possum skins and their various uses are referred to extensively in the ethno-historical records, but there has been little discussion of their considerable economic importance to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. Whilst numerous writers and historians have discussed in general terms the importance of inter-tribal trade, and some have examined the role of specific items such as greenstone axes in the Aboriginal economy,¹⁰ few studies have looked closely at the trade in possum skins in particular.¹¹

The ethnographic sources suggest that tribes were normally linked together in some kind of complex exchange system. McBryde however emphasises the social, political and judicial nature of large inter-tribal gatherings, which were a prominent feature of Aboriginal societies in Victoria, and argues that meetings held primarily for exchange 'seem to be rare'.¹² Nonetheless a number of notable occasions were recorded by whites in which inter-group exchanges did not appear to have been performed in the shadow of more impressive (ceremonial) events.¹³

The considerable range of ceremonial as well as purely utilitarian goods that were derived from possum skins demonstrates the importance of this commodity to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. Indeed, its significance as a material cultural item may be gauged from the many diverse purposes it

was used for, both before and after European contact. A list of uses would include sleeping rugs, cloaks, musical (percussion) instruments, spiritual amulets, ornamentation, handles for tools, footballs, medicines, pouches for tools, housing, water bags, baby carriers, yarn, initiation dress, and burial shrouds for deceased clans people.¹⁴

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